



A fisherman steers his boat while protected from the elements by his hard-wearing knitted jumper

Seafaring sweaters

Fisherman's jumpers are now something of a fashion item, but these garments were originally born of the need for rugged clothing in dangerous employment. **Rosee Woodland** unpicks the history of the hard-wearing 'gansey', hand-knitted by mothers, wives and sisters

Look at any old black-and-white photo of a lifeboat crew or fisherman mending crab pots on a shingle beach. Beyond the beards and weather-beaten skin you might just notice the intricately patterned sweaters that were worn by British coastal workers from the early 19th to the mid-20th century.

At their core, these navy blue, grey or black jumpers – known variously as ganseys, guernseys, jerseys and knit-frocks – were intensely practical garments. Yet, the women of Britain's fishing villages, in the simple act of making clothing to shield their men from the unforgiving sea, created a spectacular textile legacy that today is gaining the recognition it has long deserved.

Gansey designs involved complex relief patterns that symbolised 'marriage lines', cabled 'ropes', anchors, nets, ladders, flags or hearts. The wearer's initials were sometimes knitted into the hem and it was said that if you found the body of a drowned sailor, you could tell his port of origin from his jumper.

Of course it wasn't quite as simple as that. Fisherwives often created their own patterns by adapting one learned from a friend or relative, so similar designs would be popular in certain villages: the 'Betty Martin' ladder motif was well-known as the signature of a knitter in Filey, North Yorkshire.

However, any fishing families followed migratory fishing routes and "pinching patterns" was something of a sport among

the Scottish herring girls who travelled with them, so the influences overlapped. And while a dead mariner washed ashore could perhaps be identified by his clothing, bodies hauled up in nets at sea were usually thrown straight back into the water to avoid contaminating the catch. Many men, once lost overboard, were gone for good.

TIGHT-KNIT COMMUNITIES

Ganseys weren't universally worn and not every village had a tradition of knitting them – many were made by contract knitters and bought from local chandlers. But they can be traced all along the east coast from Fraserburgh to Great Yarmouth; in the inland waterways; Cornwall; the Channel Islands; and even Holland. They are widely thought to be derived from Guernsey, but some historians claim their origin lies on the British mainland. Their humble purpose means there are few records and the truth is hard to establish.

What is clear is that each man would have had at least two ganseys, one for work and another for Sunday best – a serious matter in what were very religious communities. In 19th-century Cullercoats, Northumberland, a new vicar wrongly assumed fishermen were wearing their working clothes to church and insisted they sport a shirt and tie. Rather than give up their ganseys, the entire community stopped attending the local church and built their own Fishermen's Mission at the other end of the road. ▶



WOOL FOR THE WATER

Some gansey sweaters featured all-over motifs but many were only patterned on the upper sleeves and yoke (the upper chest, shoulders and upper back), leaving the belly and arms plain to make them easier to mend. Front and back were identical, allowing the garment to be worn back to front to slow down wear, and sleeves – kept short to avoid rubbing or hooks catching – were unravelled and re-knitted many times. Usually close-fitting, ganseys were worn with nothing underneath except a thin silk scarf tucked into the neck to prevent rubbing and seal in heat, along with buttoned moleskin trousers, leather boots, and long-knitted stockings. Over the top would often be a sailcloth smock, heavy oilskins and a sou'wester hat. The wool used, dubbed 'seaman's iron', was worsted – spun to make it dense, smooth, and strong. It was knitted on tiny needles, to improve water- and wind-proofing. For fisherwives, making a gansey was a lengthy process to fit in around baiting lines, scaling, gutting, preserving and selling all the fish brought in.

As boats became more mechanised and bigger in the 20th century, overfishing led to

diminishing stocks and triggered a decline in fishing communities. Families left to find new work inland and the gansey-making tradition began to die out by the 1950s.

However, several knitters embarked on crusades to preserve the old patterns. Gladys Thompson, author of *Patterns for Guernseys, Jerseys and Arans*, wrote in 1955: “The search for them is fun – memorising them off the fisherman’s back or front. Fortunately, most of the patterns are repetitions, and if a section is memorised, the rest can be worked out on an old envelope around the corner.”

“Usually close-fitting, ganseys were worn with nothing underneath”

Ironically, the very books that preserved the tradition also watered it down, as knitters began to create a variety of ganseys, rather than sticking to designs typical to their area. Lesley Lougher of Sheringham Museum, which held an exhibition of Norfolk and

TOP A fishing crew off Grimsby, circa 1910, kitted in their ganseys
OPPOSITE TOP Thousands of women would travel from Scotland to Great Yarmouth to process the herring catch in the autumn season. Here, three Scottish herring girls knit while waiting for the fishing fleet at Great Yarmouth, 1929
OPPOSITE BOTTOM A fisherman photographed in his gansey in Whitby by Frank Meadow Sutcliffe

Dutch ganseys, said: "Ganseys are not being knitted now for fishermen to wear; but there are lots of people knitting them and lots of people wearing them."

Interest in ganseys has exploded over the past 10 years, with a series of modern pattern collections inspired by gansey designs and exhibitions dedicated to their history. Deb Gillanders became fascinated by ganseys after a chance meeting with Robin Hood's Bay fisherman and knitter Alf Hildred. They became friends, and Alf knitted her a gansey that, as custom dictated, was a snug fit. "I lost the feeling in my left hand for the first 10 days because it was so tight," laughs Deb. "But I didn't take it off for the first few months. It's a proper working garment." Each September Deb now organises Propagansey, an exhibition of ganseys, gleaned from her own collection and those of local fishing families.

HARDY CLOTHING

Although it's tempting to feel nostalgic for this era of close-knit communities, life for fisher-folk was extremely hard. For those following the herring migration down the east coast from March to November, money earned over the season would be gone by the time they'd finished mending their nets. Crab fishermen in Norfolk might row 20 miles each way to their favoured grounds with no guarantee of a good haul. Among portraits gathered by the 'gansey hunters' are many of men and boys who were later lost at sea.

While still a dangerous profession, fishing is far safer these days and the outfit consists of bib waders, hooded waterproof coats and safety boots, with fleeces providing warmth. In coastal towns ganseys are still worn – some lifeboat stations have their own designs – but they are no longer ubiquitous. Still, their appeal endures. In 2019, the Blyth Tall Ships project will attempt to sail to Antarctica to celebrate Captain William Smith's discovery of the continent 200 years earlier. As well as fitting out a tall ship to the specifications of Smith's original boat, the entire crew of 60 will wear ganseys specially designed and knitted for the expedition.



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Fisherman's jumpers of the British Isles

Seamless and with gussets at the underarms to allow for greater freedom of movement, ganseys were tight, for extra warmth and to prevent snagging. There are tales of dead sailors having to be cut out of their work ganseys. It is hard to be certain how commonly the more complex designs were worn. In the posed studio portraits often used to decipher patterns, the men would have been wearing their Sunday best. Certainly, in the more natural photographs taken by Frank Meadow Sutcliffe in Whitby (see page 47), the men at work are often wearing plainer garments. Although some patterns are claimed by specific areas, examples of many can be found hundreds of miles apart, spread by the migration of the Scottish herring girls, who gutted and packed the fish all along the east coast.



Scotland

Likely to be fastened with buttons on the shoulder, and featuring flags and diamonds. On the Aberdeenshire and Moray coast, patterns tended to be in vertical columns, while further north, horizontal patterning was more frequently used.



Cornwall

Simple lines of vertical rib stitch or horizontal seed and bars were common, along with lattice and basketweave patterns, although the local contract knitters might knit more complex designs - like this one - in order to command a higher price.



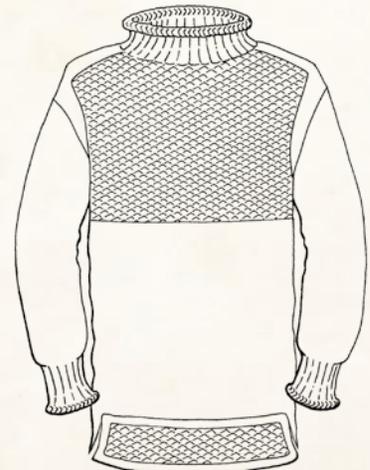
North east

Patterns were usually all over, rather than just on the yoke and the upper sleeves. Sometimes the very bottom was left plain and initials were knitted in. The famed Betty Martin 'ladder' motif is thought to originate in Filey.



Norfolk

The wool used here was notably finer and knitters often used 'all over' patterns on the yoke, rather than separating different motifs with 'spacer' bands of simpler patterning. Sheringham was known for excellent examples.



Guernsey

Guernsey sweaters tended to be longer and looser and often had a folded hem or decorative 'knotted' edge, with a small section of rib right above the hem, but were otherwise relatively plain.